



REAP IMPACT REPORT



Parenting the Future

Early childhood development (ECD) is crucial for future health, well-being, and skill formation, yet many children in low- and middle-income countries face developmental delays. These delays can lead to lifelong limitations, affecting academic achievement, adult earnings, and physical health. In rural China, the source of these delays has been consistently traced back to an absence of quality parenting. Caregivers lack the knowledge that active engagement with their babies — reading, singing, playing, telling stories — is the key to producing

thriving, smart young children. REAP research over the past decade has shown time and again that when caregivers attend training sessions on how to play and engage with their young children, the home parenting environment improves and children begin to reach their cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional potential.

Caregiver Mental Health: The Challenge Beyond Parental Training

But while many caregivers learn and change their parenting behavior after receiving training, some do not. Why? It has been shown globally that caregiver mental health problems can impact parenting practices and further hinder children's development. REAP's work in the past also has shown that parenting training is less effective (or not effective at all) when caregivers are suffering from depression, anxiety or stress. And, unfortunately, mental health problems are prevalent among mothers and grandmothers in rural China.

It is because of these dual challenges — a general absence of parenting knowledge paired with high levels of mental health issues — that REAP has led the first large-scale, multi-arm study that seeks to provide both parenting training and mental health support. Moreover, since China is continuing to push forward on ways to upscale rural early childhood education programs across the nation, we were able to implement this program as a government-led intervention that was delivered and supervised by local community agents with the full support of local officials.

The Approach

We conducted a randomized controlled trial in 120 villages in rural communities in a western China prefecture (that was mostly ethnically Han). Villages were randomized into four arms: a parenting stimulation arm; a caregiver mental health arm; a combined arm (both parenting stimulation and caregiver mental health); and a control arm with no intervention. Caregivers and their children (aged 6–24 months) participated in a 12-month study. The parenting stimulation intervention included weekly training sessions, while the caregiver mental health intervention consisted of group activities every two weeks based on the World Health Organization's Thinking Healthy curriculum, modified and expanded by our team to fit the Chinese context. Primary outcomes included measures of child development and caregiver mental health, with secondary outcomes assessing physical, psychological, and behavioral factors.



Highlights of the Study

Unpacking intervention effects. The study was set up to disentangle the individual and combined effects of parental training and caregiver mental health interventions, providing insights into the most effective strategies for promoting early childhood development and caregiver well-being. The main findings include:

- Parental training — by itself — works. Consistent with five previous REAP studies (and the work of other groups across China), when caregivers receive parenting training, children's cognitive and language development outcomes improve.
- Parental training + caregiver mental health support, our combined intervention, is even more impactful. Not only is there an equivalent impact on child cognition and language outcomes, but caregiver mental health also improves significantly.
- Caregiver mental health support is impactful, but less so when delivered alone. Participation in the program led to improvements in child motor development and an increase in caregivers' interactive practices with children. Mothers and grandmothers also reported feeling relief after the sessions, and perceived strong peer support from each other. But caregiver mental health support by itself does not significantly reduce the depressive symptoms of caregivers. This may speak to the significant role that child rearing plays in shaping the mental state of caregivers. Perhaps without the tools to better engage with and enjoy their children, caregivers remain frustrated and their mental health challenges remain unaddressed.



Government-led large-scale impact. By partnering with local government bodies and community members as delivery agents, this research assesses the impact of government-led interventions on a large scale, enhancing the potential for sustainable and widespread implementation. For this reason, the research has the potential to inform policies and practices aimed at improving early childhood development and caregiver mental health in rural China and other low- and middle-income countries. The findings will be disseminated through policy briefs, publications, and community outreach, ensuring that the knowledge gained reaches key stakeholders.



What Is Next?

- Continue to update and improve our mental health support curriculum, making it easier to teach and even more relevant to the experiences of rural caregivers.
- Fully hand over the project to the local government.
- Improve mental health training of trainers. It could be that those who were delivering mental health support did not have a deep enough grasp on mental health issues to teach the curriculum as effectively as possible.

